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The Problem of Ideology in American Literary History

Sacvan Bercovitch

For my present purposes, and in terms of my immediate concerns, the problem of ideology in American literary history has three different though closely related aspects: first, the multivolume American literary history I have begun to edit; then, the concept of ideology as a constituent part of literary study; and, finally, the current revaluation of the American Renaissance. I select this period because it has been widely regarded as both the source and the epitome of our literary tradition; because it has become, accordingly, the focal point of the critical revision now under way in American studies; and because, from either of these perspectives, literary or critical, it seems to me a particularly fitting subject for the occasion. For one thing, we owe the idea of an American Renaissance to F. O. Matthiessen, who was a prime mover of the Salzburg Seminar, and a member of its first faculty in 1947. Moreover, *American Renaissance* was a classic work of revisionist criticism. It reset the terms for the study of American literary history; it gave us a new canon of classic texts; and it inspired the growth of American studies in the United States and abroad. It is not too much to say that Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, and the Salzburg Seminar brought American literature to postwar Europe. What followed, from the late forties through the sixties, was the flowering of a new academic field, complete with programs of study, periodicals, theses, conferences, and a distinguished procession of scholarly authorities, including many graduates of the Salzburg Seminar.

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Matthiessen figures as a watershed in this development. For if *American Renaissance* marked the seeding-time of a new academic field, it was also the harvest of some three decades of literary study. I refer, first of all, to the dual legacy that Matthiessen acknowledges of T. S. Eliot and Vernon Parrington—which is to say, the partnership in *American Renaissance* between the terms “literary” and “history”; or, in the words of Matthiessen’s subtitle, between *Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*: “art,” meaning a small group of aesthetic masterpieces, and “expression,” meaning representative works, reflecting and illuminating the culture at large. It was the remarkable achievement of Matthiessen that his book yokes these concepts gracefully together. Somehow, one concept seems to support the other. The historical designation *American* seems richer for its association with an aesthetic renaissance; Emerson’s and Whitman’s art gains substance by its capacity to express the age. Matthiessen himself did not feel it necessary to explain the connection. But we can see in retrospect that what made it work—what made it, indeed, unnecessary for Matthiessen to explain the connection—was an established consensus, or rather a consensus long in the making, which *American Renaissance* helped establish. I mean a consensus about the term “literary” that involved the legitimation of a certain canon, and a consensus about the term “history” that was legitimated by a certain concept of America.

That double process of legitimation may be traced in the emergence of the United States, between World War I and World War II, as the major capitalist power or, in the Cold War terms of the late forties, the leader of the Free World. Providentially, we have two sets of literary landmarks, European and American, to commemorate the process. At one end, in 1917, D. H. Lawrence’s germinal *Studies in Classic American Literature* and the *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (hereafter, the first *Cambridge History*); at the other end, framing the U.S. experience in World War II, *American Renaissance* (1941) and *The Literary History of the United States*, by Robert Spiller et al. (1948), which proceeds teleologically, from “The Colonies” through “Democracy” and “Expansion” to “A World Literature.” “Increasing power and vitality,” according to Spiller’s opening “Address to the Reader,” “are extraordinarily characteristic of [our nation]. . . . Never has nature been so rapidly and so extensively altered by the efforts of man in so brief a time. Never has conquest resulted in a more vigorous development of initiative, individualism, self-reliance,

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and demands for freedom." Hence the "Americanness" of our major authors. Ours has been a literature "profoundly influenced by ideals and by practices developed in democratic living. It has been intensely conscious of the needs of the common man, and equally conscious of the aspirations of the individual. . . . It has been humanitarian. It has been, on the whole, an optimistic literature, made virile by criticism of the actual in comparison with the ideal."¹ Significantly, Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* celebrates the same manly ideals. Even while recognizing (as Spiller does) the tragic-ironic emphasis of Hawthorne and Melville, Matthiessen tells us in his introductory chapter that "the one common denominator of my five writers . . . was their devotion to the possibilities of democracy." And like Spiller, he locates those possibilities in self-reliance, initiative, individualism, and (to recall Matthiessen's original title) the freedom of "Man in the Open Air." Whitman, Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, and Melville, he explains, all "felt it was incumbent on their generation to give fulfilment to the potentialities freed by the Revolution, to provide a culture commensurate with America's political opportunity."²

This is the background against which the new literary history will have to define itself. During the past couple of decades consensus of all kinds has broken down—left and right, political and aesthetic—broken down, worn out, or at best opened up. Conspicuous among these is the dual tradition that Matthiessen inherited: on the one hand the literary consensus authorized by Eliot, which announced itself as the New Criticism; and on the other hand, the consensus history (as we have come to call it) through which Parrington defined the main currents of American culture. Together, these traditions issued, in *American Renaissance*, as the vision of five marginal men who represented not only their own age but the very meaning of America. The reason for the current ferment in American studies is that the assumptions behind that vision no longer seem to account for the evidence. We have come to feel that the context they provide conceals as much as it reveals. To use a once-fashionable phrase, the paradigm has become inoperative. What we have instead is a Babel of contending approaches, argued with a ferocity reminiscent of the polemics that erupted in the last, great days of Rome, and that Augustine lamented as the barbarism of the scholastics. I do not mean by this to suggest some ominous political parallel. My point is simply that the risk we run in undertaking an American literary history now is that it will be perceived, upon its devoutly wished-for publication in 1989, as being neither history nor literary nor American.

Let me say at once that I don't see any solution to the problem. Or rather, the only solution I see lies in making the problem itself the cornerstone of the project. It was the achievement of Matthiessen and Spiller to consolidate a powerful literary-historical consensus. It will be our task to make the best of what (for lack of a better term) may be called a period of "dissensus." So I come to the first part of my subject, the new

Cambridge History of American Literature. My purpose here is purely descriptive. I would like to give some general sense of how this work is being put together—if nothing else, to outline the sorts of questions that lie behind our pasteboard decisions.³

How, then, to make a virtue of dissensus? To start with, we decided to go with those whose dissensus it is; that is, with Americanists trained in the sixties and early seventies. Our contributors are generally between tenure and forty-five; they represent no special approach, school, network, or set of principles, except the principles of excellence and balance. They were chosen for the quality of their work, for their diversity of views and interests, and for their openness to other, conflicting views and interests. None of this necessarily implies a rift between generations. Some of these young scholars are confessed traditionalists; others are openly building upon the work of their teachers; and all of them are committed to presenting not just their own insights but those of peers and predecessors. Still, they will present these from within a distinctive generational experience; and that experience (of discontinuity, disruption, dissensus) requires its distinctive form of expression. In considering a format for the *History*, no obvious precedent came to mind. The “omnium-gatherum” seemed as inappropriate for our purposes as did the alternative model of the single-author history, and for much the same reasons. The eclectic mode of the first *Cambridge History* assumes comprehensiveness and objectivity. The cyclical design of the Spiller *History* expresses a single-minded attempt at synthesis.

Any contemporary effort will have to be flexible, open-ended, and self-reflexive. This may help explain our decision to restrict the number of contributors. Lacking the authority for synthesis, we felt we should encourage personal voices. Lacking faith in sheer plenitude, we felt it necessary to allow fuller scope for active collaboration, not only within each volume, but across volumes. In short, we wanted neither a host of piece-work specialists to fill out a putative grand design, nor representatives of a host of eclectic constituencies to satisfy some putative statistical norm (twelve pages for the Chicanos, fourteen for the Chinese, two for the Eskimo). Perhaps the right term for the approach we sought is *integrative*, in the sense of narrative integration, and with the qualifications I have just mentioned. Integrative, as distinct from either eclectic or synthetic: personal voices, responsive to different voices, but allowed ample development in their own right; continuities and contrasts between eras, emerging neither by chance nor by editorial fiat, but through substantive interchange between contributors. Clearly, this precarious balance of latitude and mutuality would require a group of manageable size. We need an Aristotelian mean between the hubris of Parrington’s one and the anonymity of Spiller’s fifty-five “et al.” We settled on twenty-one contributors, for five volumes of about six hundred pages each.

Twenty-one spokespersons for dissensus! I cannot say that the prospect filled me with confidence. The next step in our venture was to bring the

group together and see what assurances could be worked out. Partly the conference dealt with practical matters. But most of it, and by all accounts the most reassuring part, was devoted to the moot points. Without compromising on basic differences, the contributors found they could agree on what the central questions were; on the need for a narrative form which, in texture and substance, would embody the questions they shared; and on the central importance of history in dealing with those questions, not only because the contributors were already themselves committed to writing a literary history, but because they were convinced that the tendency of literary theory, in all its varieties, from deconstruction and feminism to ethnicity, semiotics, and cultural archaeology, lay in that direction. That sense of common questions and directions was enough to start with; but it did not resolve what I believe was implicitly the central issue of the conference, the problem of ideology. Let me emphasize the personal note: ideology was not on the agenda; it did not enter our discussions in any direct and substantive way; it does not refer to any particular political stance; and it will not be the unifying theme of our *History*. But *as a problem*, I think, ideology will become increasingly important to all the contributors in the course of writing the *History*.

That implicit and insidious problem is the central concern of this paper, and it may be well to begin with a general definition.⁴ I mean by ideology the ground and texture of consensus. In its narrowest sense, this may be a consensus of a marginal or maverick group. In the broad sense in which I use the term here (in conjunction with the term "America"), ideology is the system of interlinked ideas, symbols, and beliefs by which a culture—any culture—seeks to justify and perpetuate itself; the web of rhetoric, ritual, and assumption through which society coerces, persuades, and coheres. So considered, ideology is basically conservative; but it is not therefore static or simply repressive. As Raymond Williams points out, ideology evolves through conflict, and even when a certain ideology achieves dominance it still finds itself contending to one degree or another with the ideologies of residual and emergent cultures within the society—contending, that is, with alternative and oppositional forms that reflect the course of historical development. In this process, ideology functions best through voluntary acquiescence, when the network of ideas through which the culture justifies itself is internalized rather than imposed, and embraced by society at large as a system of belief. Under these conditions, which Antonio Gramsci described as "hegemony," the very terms of cultural restriction become a source of creative release: they serve to incite the imagination, to unleash the energies of reform, to encourage diversity and accommodate change—all this, while directing the rights of diversity into a rite of cultural assent.

I would like to advance this model, hypothetically, as a description of what we have come to term the American ideology. And having done so, let me enter two caveats. The first is that the term itself is somewhat misleading. The American ideology suggests something almost allegorical—

some abstract corporate monolith—whereas in fact the American ideology reflects a particular set of interests, the power structures and conceptual forms of modern middle-class society in the United States, as these evolved through three centuries of contradiction and discontinuity. So considered, “America” is not an overarching synthesis, *e pluribus unum*, but a rhetorical battleground, a symbol that has been made to stand for diverse and sometimes mutually antagonistic outlooks. My second caveat tends in the opposite direction—a qualification of the qualification. I would urge that, in spite of all that diversity and conflict, the American ideology has achieved a hegemony unequalled elsewhere in the modern world. For all its manifold contradictions, it is an example par excellence of the successful interaction between restriction and release, rhetoric and social action. An ideology, to repeat, arises out of historical circumstances, and then re-presents these, symbolically and conceptually, as though they were natural, universal, and right—as though the ideals promulgated by a certain group or class (in this case, individualism, mobility, self-reliance, free enterprise) were not the product of history but the expression of self-evident truth. The act of re-presentation thus serves to consecrate a set of cultural limitations, to recast a particular society as Society, a particular way of life as the pursuit of happiness. Ideology denies limitation, rhetorically, in order to facilitate the continuity of certain rhetorical forms. But the forms themselves may be expansive, dynamic. Ideology transmutes history into myth so as to enable people to act in history.

In this sense, ideology stands at the intersection between the terms “literary” and “history,” mediating between canon and context, expressive form and social structure. When mediation succeeds, literary historians can proceed under the aspect of eternity, as though they were free of ideology, unfettered by limits of time and place. It is the sort of freedom that Augustine felt, in setting out the correct path for exegesis; or the Anglican Thomas Hooker, explaining the “divine” right of kings; or Karl Marx, discovering the “scientific” laws of history; or Emerson, announcing the “transcendent” prospects of the American Scholar. In each case, freedom is a function of consensus. And lest I seem to have exempted myself from that process, I would like to declare the principles of my own ideological dependence. I hold these truths to be self-evident: that there is no escape from ideology; that so long as human beings remain political animals they will always be bounded in some degree by consensus; and that so long as they are symbol-making animals they will always seek in some way to persuade themselves (and others) that *their* symbology is the last, best hope of mankind.

I think it’s safe to say that I share these principles with all or most of the contributors to the new *Cambridge History*. It is a commitment to partiality that allows for only two alternatives to the authority of consensus: either to subscribe to a different consensus altogether, or else to confront the problem of ideology, in an attempt to understand its limits and

describe its methods of representation. The option, in short, is not time or eternity; it is the nature and degree of one's involvement in consensus. And that option depends in turn not just on qualities of mind and vision but on the historical moment. It seems to me largely a matter of history that both Matthiessen and Spiller assumed that American literary history transcended ideology: *American* because it stood for the universal possibilities of democracy, *history* because it was an objective account of the facts, and *literary* because great art was to be judged in its own timeless terms. It seems to me equally a matter of history, a measure of the dissensus of our times, that all those concepts—history, literary, American, and transcendence—are now subjects of ideological debate.

Let me briefly recall the sources of that quandary.⁵ One is the recognition that questions of race and gender are integral to formalist analysis. Another is the recognition that political norms are inscribed in aesthetic judgment and therefore inherent in the process of interpretation. Still another is the recognition that aesthetic structures shape the way we understand history, so that tropes and narrative devices may be said to use historians to enforce certain views of the past. These perceptions stem from contending approaches in contemporary critical discourse. Directly and indirectly, the controversies engendered by these approaches, and by the differences between them, have undermined the old terms of consensus and thereby heightened a broad ideological awareness among Americanists, while at the same time providing them with new modes of analysis.

Still another source of this quandary, which might be termed the fall from transcendence into history, is the widespread critique of the so-called myth and symbol school of American studies, not only by a new generation of critics, but by the founders themselves. Henry Nash Smith, for example, tells us in a recent essay that he failed in *Virgin Land* to consider the "tragic dimensions of the Westward Movement" because they were cloaked in ideas so familiar as to be "almost inaccessible to critical examination." Now, the same ideas ("civilization," "free land," "frontier initiative," "self-reliance") also obscured the views of the writers he treats, as well as serving, historically, to inspire the energies and rationalize the atrocities of the Westward movement.⁶ It amounts to a casebook example of ideology in action, a model instance of the relation between interpretation, imaginative expression, and social action that creates and sustains consensus.

The example here is mainly negative, a model of intellectual constriction. This, indeed, is the model commonly associated with ideology, as we have inherited the concept from the social sciences. According to this tradition, ideology is inherently suspect, and analysis naturally seeks to expose its limitations through a process of debunking, unmasking, demystifying. In this case the process deserves special emphasis for the contrast it suggests between myth criticism and ideological analysis. Like

ideology, myth is inherently suspect, and for much the same reasons: it is (among other things) a vehicle of culturally prescribed directives for thought and behavior. Literary critics, however, have tended to avoid the parallel by enforcing a sort of exegetical imperative of inversion. Since ideology pretends to truth, the task of analysis is to uncover, rationally, the sinister effects of its fictions. Since myths are fictions, the task is to display, empathetically, their "deeper truths"—the abiding values embedded in simple plots, the range and richness of formulaic metaphors. This double standard reflects the familiar Kantian distinction between the aesthetic and the cognitive faculties. To criticize a myth is to "appreciate" it from within, to explicate it "intrinsically," in its own "organic" terms. To criticize a piece of ideology is to "see through" it, to "expose" its historical functions, necessarily from an "extrinsic," and usually from a "hostile" perspective.

Hence the corrective import of "ideology" in recent American studies. It is an attempt by a new generation of scholars to distance themselves from cultural preconceptions, so as to make the study of myth a mode of cognitive criticism. This approach constitutes a fresh direction in the field and it has had salutary effects; but the approach itself remains problematic for literary history. For one thing, the extrinsic method seizes on negative aspects of ideology; its diagnoses feed on social disease. Significantly, the recent studies I mentioned in American ideology exclude consideration of the rhetoric of civil rights, the ideals of conservationism, the appeal to liberty, and for that matter the sheer vitality of the culture. That may be no more than a choice of focus, but effectually it misrepresents the very nature of ideology, which (in the broad sense I intend here) is to enact the purposes of a society in its totality. We come to feel, in reading these works, that the American ideology is a system of ideas in the service of evil rather than (like any ideology) a system of ideas wedded for good and evil to a certain social order.

Another, more serious problem is that the extrinsic approach sets the critic at odds with the work of literature. I mean *work* in its functional sense, the constructing of an imaginary world that invites a suspension of disbelief and requires an appreciation of the writer's power to persuade the reader to that suspension. One familiar resolution of the problem, reinforced in different ways by Matthiessen and Spiller, is to separate high art from popular culture through an almost dogmatic application of the distinction I made earlier between intrinsic and extrinsic criticism. Our classic writers are honored as keepers of the American myth; all other writers (especially the popular ones) are unmasked as representatives of American ideology. When Robert Rantoul invokes the tenets of *laissez-faire* to attack the abuses of capitalism, we claim that his views are contradictory or ambivalent. When John O'Sullivan advances the principles of minimal government, self-reliance, and American progress, we accuse him of using ideology to veil oppression. When Emerson, Thoreau, and

Whitman express that ambivalence and advance those principles, we say they're creating ambiguities, criticizing the actual under the aspect of the ideal, and enhancing the possibilities of democracy.

I am not forgetting the vast differences between these men in mind and imagination; nor do I mean to deny important differences in their relation to the dominant culture. My point is that the traditional dichotomy between art and ideology—a pillar of the old consensus—is problematic and has increasingly become a subject of debate for this generation. For though in some sense, certainly, a work of art transcends its time—though it may be transhistorical or transcultural or even transcanonical—it can no more transcend ideology than an artist's mind can transcend psychology; and it may even be that writers who translate political attitudes into universal ideals are just as implicated as the others in the social order and, in the long run, are perhaps more useful in perpetuating it. This is not at all to denigrate their achievement. Nor is it to deny that American writers have sometimes used the symbol of America to expose ideological contradictions, and so on some level turned the cultural symbology against the dominant culture. Nor, finally, is it to forget the special capacities of language to break free of social restrictions and through its own dynamics to undermine the power structure it seems to reflect. It will continue to be a function of literary history to define what is extraordinary, irreducible, and uncontained about our major texts. But obviously any defense of literature (as art) which requires a pejorative view of popular culture (as ideology) is itself ideological, part of a strategy designed to enforce the separation of "spheres of influence": business from family, government from religion, politics from art. Like other apologies for literature, as handmaid to theology or as servant of the state, this one has its origins neither in the laws of nature nor in the will of God but in history and culture. And I would suggest that a heightened ideological awareness may help us not only to understand literary texts more fully in their own time but more precisely to define their transhistorical import.

I have in mind a cultural dialectic, attuned to the power of language no less than the language of power, sensitive to the emotional and imaginative appeal of myth while insisting on the cognitive dimensions of art. And what makes this sort of model viable, or at least approachable, is the emergence over the last two decades of a sophisticated concept of ideology that is newly useful for the study of literature. I think above all of various forms of Marxism, or neo-Marxism, that have broken from Marx's mechanistic view of base/superstructure, much as recent forms of Freudianism have broken from Freud's simplistic view of art as wish-fulfillment and child's play—not to deny the interactions between rhetoric and social or biological reality, but to reinterpret these in ways that allow for the complexities of consciousness and for the *shaping* influence of rhetoric on reality. Basically, Marx saw ideology as false consciousness; he tended to define any ideology that differed from his own as a form

of subjectivity that obfuscated scientific analysis. Recent forms of Marxism (influenced in part by a new, relativistic model of science) have abandoned that dream of objective knowledge. Much as the unconscious has come to be seen as a crucial aspect of consciousness, subjectivity for these neo-Marxists, from Frankfurt to Paris, Oxford, New Haven, and Berkeley, has become a constituent of history.

This is not the place to detail the change.⁷ Let me simply list some of its major aspects: the emphasis on language as an intrinsic part of the *material* of history, and hence itself a central category of historical analysis; the sense of social reality as being at once volatile and malleable, and thus susceptible to radical transformation through the agencies of art; the redefinition of the work of imagination as the constant structure of social knowledge; the concern with silences and ruptures in the text as constituting a vision of cultural alternatives (a vision muted, repressed, but nonetheless formally manifest in the world of the text); the development of a utopian hermeneutics which sees in the values, symbols, and ideas of a given culture, as these are represented in art, the primary structures of human needs and aspirations—the first principles of a sort of noumenal “collective logic”—so that interpretation becomes the bridge between ideology and the ideal. What is striking here for my purpose is the intense concern with expressive form. If the old “vulgar Marxism” tended to flatten works of art into political blueprints, this new Marxism, as though in overcompensation, compels an even closer reading of the text—a more rigorous attention to paradox, irony, and ambiguity—than that dreamed of by the New Critics. The text, it would seem, has been invested with all the subtleties of historical process so that history may be understood through the subtleties of literary criticism.

In some cases, this amounts to textuality raised to the status of biblical exegesis. I believe that, here as elsewhere, Marxism betrays its roots in the Reformation, with its obsessive apocalyptic correlations between scripture and current events. But my point is not to make a brief for or against Marxism. It is to indicate the possibilities available to literary historians beset by the problem of ideology. From this perspective, I should stress, first, that I have given prominence to Marxist theorists because it happens that they have been the ones most actively engaged with ideological analysis. Second, their engagement is of particular interest because it insists simultaneously on the historicity of the text and the linguistic, expressive dimensions of historical experience. Third, that insistence has tended toward the development of an intrinsic mode of ideological criticism, a form of historical diagnosis which requires an appreciation of ideology from within, in its full imaginative and emotional appeal. Fourth, that development has remarkable—and for the literary historian, richly provocative—affinities with non-Marxist approaches to ideology. I think, for example, of Max Weber’s concept of ideology as a positive, empowering force—not so much the child of history as a pervasive

historical and cultural agent in its own right—and of Karl Mannheim's "sociology of knowledge," where all knowledge is by definition ideological, so that (in his words) reality is "the interplay between these distinctive attitudes in the total social process." For both Weber and Mannheim (as also, implicitly, for Kenneth Burke), ideology provides a focus for historical understanding that is grounded in the substantiality of expressive form. And much the same may be said of Clifford Geertz. Although Geertz confines his analysis in this respect to periods of cultural transition, still his analysis centers on the relation between ideological "systems of meaning" and historical "modes of knowledge."⁸ In the wake of consensus, he writes, ideology directs the search for a new coherence. And I would add that, while waiting for the new coherence, dissensus directs us toward the problem of ideology.

This seems to me a particularly promising direction in the case of American literary studies. I spoke earlier of the symbol of America as a rhetorical battleground, but of course it could become so only because, from its origins, the symbol was so transparently ideological. What could be a clearer demonstration of ideas in the service of power than the system of beliefs which the early colonists imposed on the so-called New World? What clearer demonstration of the shaping power of ideology than the procession of declarations through which the republic was consecrated as New Israel, Nature's Nation in the Land of Futurity? "America" is a laboratory for examining the shifting connections between politics (in the broadest sense) and cultural expression, or, in Geertz's terms, between historical knowledge and aesthetic systems of meaning. This is nowhere more evident than in the mid-nineteenth century, when the process of consecration was hardening into cultural consensus; when, accordingly, the conflicts inherent in the symbol of America became most pronounced; and when, under pressure of vast economic change and impending civil war, the culture found expression, in all its contradictions and all its power of compelling allegiance, in a self-consciously *American* literary renaissance. And the conditions for examining that renaissance in its broadest meanings, literary and historical, were never more auspicious than they are now, when the old ideological consensus has broken down.

So I come to my third and final subject, the problem of ideology in the current revaluation of the American Renaissance. In the interests of brevity, I confine myself to one aspect of the problem, the much-discussed radicalism of our classic writers. The issue has special relevance here because it was central to the process of canon formation from Lawrence through Matthiessen. The literary establishment that substituted *Song of Myself* for *The Song of Hiawatha* also sanctified Whitman as outsider and nonconformist. The scholars and critics who raised *Moby-Dick* to sudden epic prominence proceeded to acclaim Melville for his No-in-thunder to the powers of the earth. Directly and indirectly, the old consensus tended to privilege the subversive: duplicity in Hawthorne, protest in Thoreau,

marginality in Poe, antinomianism in Emerson. All this, be it noted, in the name of a distinctly *national* tradition, a classic literature newly recovered for its quintessential "Americanness."

It will be a major problem of the new literary history to explain the paradox of an antagonist literature that is somehow also culturally representative. That did not really trouble an earlier generation of critics because they tended to separate the America of the myth, represented by our classic writers, from the real America, represented by ideologues and their victims. Literary history, I believe, requires us to integrate those two kinds of representation. What forms that integration will take will in large measure determine the extent to which we will achieve what I called an integrated narrative. Somehow, we will have to take the American Renaissance out of the realm of cultural schizophrenia which is the legacy of the old consensus and relocate it firmly in history, which is to say, at the center of the antebellum movement toward industrialization, incorporation, and civil war. On some basic level, we will have to reconceive our so-called radical or subversive literary tradition as an insistent engagement with society, rather than a recurrent flight from it. In other words, we will have to re-historicize the ideal Americas projected in our major texts—those fabled frontier republics of the soul and worlds elsewhere of endless (because self-generating) ambiguity, those romance lands of moral antinomies (Old Serpent and New Adam, Innocence and Experience)—we will have to re-see these fictions historically, in dynamic relation to the culture: neither as mirrors of their time, nor as lamps of the creative imagination, but as works of *ideological* mimesis, at once implicated in the society they resist, capable of overcoming the forces that compel their complicity, and nourished by the culture they often seem to subvert.

With this end in view, let me outline two current approaches to the problem. How can an antagonist literature be said to be culturally representative? And specifically, in what sense does this group of *American* classics, themselves so deeply concerned with the idea of America, represent a radical literary tradition? One answer begins in the utopian hermeneutics I noted earlier. In this perspective, all utopian visions, secular or religious, express powerful feelings of social discontent; many are adopted by repressed or ascendant groups to challenge the status quo; and while some of them are thus incorporated into the ideology of a new social order, nonetheless, *as* utopian visions, even these remain a potential source of social unrest, a standing invitation to resistance and revolt. Every ideology, that is, breeds its own opposition, every culture its own counterculture. The same ideals that at one point nourish the system may later become the basis of a new revolutionary consensus, one that invokes those ideals on behalf of an entirely different way of life, moral and material.

Now, in the mid-nineteenth century the source of dissent was an indigenous residual culture, variously identified with agrarianism, lib-

ertarian thought, and the tradition of civic humanism. By any name, it was the guiding ideology of the early republic. It had provided an impetus to revolution, a series of rituals of cohesion, and a rationale for the political and social structures of nationhood. As the economy expanded, those structures shifted to accommodate new commercial interests. But the cultural continuities were too strong, too basic, for the ideals themselves to be discarded. They were the self-evident truths, after all, of liberal democracy. So the earlier rhetoric persisted, supported by preindustrial traditions and regional agrarian communities that increasingly contrasted with the ways of the Jacksonian marketplace. And on the ground of that opposition, our classic writers developed a sweeping critique of the dominant culture. It was a diagnosis from within, based on the profound engagement of these writers with a society in transition from agrarian to industrial capitalism, and it issued in an imaginative rendering of that society which was at once radical and representative, an exposé of inherent contradictions that re-created the culture in its full complexity.

The result, of course, was far more than exposé. It was (to repeat) a diagnosis from within, rooted in the rhetoric of an earlier America, a rhetoric that had lost its direct social function though it remained nonetheless a staple of national self-definition. And thus freed of its practical tasks—which included, let me recall, the preservation of slavery in the South, and the exclusion of large parts of the population everywhere in the country from the privileges of power—divested of these and other ideological responsibilities to the social order, the rhetoric could appeal now with the greater purity, as the vehicle of disinterested universal truth. If it could no longer serve the culture, it could serve the cause of culture at large, by conserving the myths of a bygone age. Accordingly, it aligned itself, against the actual course of events, with transhistorical dreams of human wholeness and social regeneration, and thereby invested the notion of an ideal America with a politically transformative potential. In sum, the ideology of the early republic became, in the utopian form of myth and promise, a fundamental challenge to the national republic. And in the major works of the American Renaissance the challenge found its classic literary expression. Both as cultural critique and as prophetic summons, these classics turned the ideological norms they represented—independence, liberty, enterprise, opportunity, individualism, democracy, “America” itself—against the American Way.

This view of American literary radicalism promises a fuller account than we have had of what Matthiessen (and many others after him, including Spiller) termed the conflict between the real and the ideal America. But the assumption of radicalism itself remains problematic. It derives on the one hand from pronouncements of the writers themselves, who may not be reliable in this as in other matters, and on the other hand from the authority of critics, like Matthiessen, who may have had their own special interests for identifying (so as to identify with) an antagonist yet representative American literature. From either perspective,

we must consider an altogether different possibility—that our major writers were not subversive at all, or were radical in a representative way that *reaffirmed* the culture, rather than undermining it. This approach also begins in a recognition of the utopian element in our classic texts, but it proceeds from that to note that characteristically, as a matter of course, the dominant culture adopts utopia for its own purposes. It does not simply endorse transhistorical ideals of harmony and regeneration; it absorbs and molds these in ways that support the social system. It redefines the dream-visions of organic community (paradise lost and to be regained) to fit its distinctive system of values. It re-creates the archetypes of the racial unconscious in its own image. It ritualizes the egalitarian energies of the liminal process in such a way as to harness discontent to the social enterprise. It allowed Martin Luther King, Jr., the grandson of slaves, to mobilize the civil rights movement on the grounds that racism is un-American. It allows Ronald Reagan to hitch the rhetoric of John Winthrop and Tom Paine to the campaign wagon for Star Wars.

So molded, ritualized, and controlled, utopianism has served here as elsewhere to diffuse or deflect dissent, or actually to transmute it into a vehicle of socialization. Indeed, it is not too much to see this as ideology's chief weapon. Ideology represses alternative or oppositional forms when these arise. But it seeks first of all to preempt them, and it does so most effectively by *drawing out* protest, by actively *encouraging* the contrast between utopia and the status quo. The method is as old as ideology itself. Any form of protest, utopian or other, threatens society most fundamentally when it calls into question the claims of that society to represent things as they ought to be (by divine right, natural law, the dictates of scripture, the forms of reason). Fundamental protest, that is, involves a historicist, relativistic perspective on the claims of ideology. And the immemorial response of ideology, what we might call its instinctive defense, has been to redefine protest in terms of the system, as a complaint about shortcomings from the ideal. Thus the very act of identifying malfunction becomes an appeal for cohesion. To that end, ideology seeks to focus attention on the distance between vision and fact, theory and practice. To denounce a king through precepts derived from the divine right of kings is to define government itself as monarchical; just as to denounce immoral Christians by contrast with the sacred example of Christ is to sacralize Christian morality. To define injustice through particular violations of free enterprise (or its constituent elements, such as social mobility, open opportunity, and self-fulfillment) is to consecrate free enterprise as *the* just society.

Hence the enormous conservative, restraining power in the alliance between utopia and ideology. It allows the dominant culture not merely to enforce rules of conduct, but to circumscribe the bounds of perception, thought, and desire. And if that culture dominates not by coercion but by consent—if its rituals are not traditional but newly formed, and “new”

as well by *cultural fiat* (new rituals of what Winthrop, Paine, and Reagan called a New People in a New World); if the population, moreover, is broadly heterogeneous (and again, *heterogeneous as well by cultural fiat*, the self-proclaimed haven of the oppressed and heir of the ages); if its power, therefore, depends on myths and values to which all levels of society subscribe, *especially the excluded and oppressed* (since to subscribe thus, as Martin Luther King promised, is the ready way to power); and if, finally, it is a culture founded on the principles of contract, voluntarism, and self-interest—a culture whose primary unit is the self, and whose primary rites, accordingly, encourage the *potentially* subversive doctrine of individualism (with its insidious claims for freedom and equality)—if the culture, that is, combines the conditions of modernization in the United States with the principles of liberal democracy, then the need to preclude alternatives *a priori*, before they can become radical fact, assumes special urgency.

We might say that the American ideology was made to fill that need. It undertakes above all, as a condition of its nurture, to absorb the spirit of protest for social ends; and according to a number of recent critics, it has accomplished this most effectively through its rhetoric of dissent. In this view, our classic texts re-present the strategies of a triumphant middle-class hegemony. Far from subverting the status quo, their diagnostic and prophetic modes attest to the capacities of the dominant culture to co-opt alternative forms to the point of making basic change seem virtually unthinkable, except as apocalypse. This is not at all to minimize their protest. The point is not that our classic writers had no quarrel with America, but that they seem to have had nothing *but* that to quarrel about. Having adopted the culture's *controlling* metaphor—"America" as synonym for human possibility—and having made this tenet of consensus the ground of radical dissent, they redefined radicalism itself as an affirmation of cultural values. For the metaphor, thus universalized, does not transcend ideology. It portrays the American ideology, as all ideology yearns to be portrayed, in the transcendent colors of utopia. In this sense our literary renaissance was truly, as Matthiessen said, both American and "the age of Emerson and Whitman." The conjunction is writ large in *The American Scholar*, which denounces the present in order to awaken the nation to its millennial calling, and in *Democratic Vistas*, which, in the very act of chastising the nation, identifies the American future as utopia and utopia, by extension, as the essence and telos of the American Way.

So perceived, what Matthiessen termed the one common denominator of our classic texts lies in the possibilities of democracy as these have been shaped into strategies of consensus. And the same strategies apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the tragic-ironic visions of Hawthorne and Melville. Both men perceived evil in many forms, and both had a remarkable gift for seeing through those forms to metaphysical issues; but their insight was attended by an equally remarkable blindness to social limits. What

they could not see all too often was that the issues themselves were culturally determined; that the universals they invoked might obscure or disguise or even serve to reconcile us to the evils they attacked—as Ishmael reconciles himself to the tyranny of Ahab (“Who ain’t a slave?” he explains), or as Hester is reconciled, finally, to her scarlet letter. Social injustice, she tells the local dissidents, will resolve itself in due time, by providential, not human means; and Hawthorne was to echo her advice, two years later, in rebuking the abolitionists for seeking to “tear apart” the “sacred union” over the question of slavery. But the real issue is not reconciliation or repudiation; it is ideological restriction. What our major writers could not conceive, either in their optative or in their tragic-ironic moods, was that the United States was neither utopia at best nor dystopia at worst, neither “the world’s fairest hope,” as Melville put it, nor “man’s foulest crime,” but a certain political system; that *in principle* no less than in practice the American Way was neither providential nor natural but one of many possible forms of society.⁹

Hence the representative, *American* radicalism of our classic literature: it was the aesthetic flowering of an ideology adopted from the start precisely for its ability to transmute radicalism of all kinds, from religious protest to revolutionary war, into varieties of ideological consensus. And since this approach implies a fundamental challenge both to the old consensus and to large parts of the current dissensus—since it stands opposed to the continuing valorization of the subversive elements in American literature—I want to add, as emphatically as possible, that the argument I have just outlined does not in any sense diminish the aesthetic power of the texts themselves. It does not even require, on the critic’s part, an adversary stance toward the culture.¹⁰ We need think no less of Chaucer for his commitment to the “medieval world view”; we may even praise his culture for having provided him with so rich a system of ideas, symbols, and beliefs. So too, with Whitman and Emerson: they need not embarrass us by their failure, if such it was, to see through the rhetoric of free-enterprise democracy. What they did see, when they plumbed the emotional and conceptual ground of the rhetoric, was profound, humane, and exhilarating, a set of beliefs and promises which may rank among the most liberating, most energizing ideas produced by any culture, past or present. It was a rhetoric which enlisted the spirit of revolution in the cause of social continuity; which recast self-interest, as individualism, into a concept of self-fulfillment that allowed for mutuality and community; which invested the dream of progress with moral as well as material imperatives (or better, perhaps, which invested those moral imperatives with the concern for material improvement); which in either sense translated the spirit of expansion into a vision of growth, experimentation, and constant renewal; and which, summarily, created in the word “America” the most compelling cultural symbol of the modern era, nationally and internationally.

The rhetoric here is inseparable from the country's astonishing economic, political, and technological achievements in the nineteenth century. It is inseparable, too, from the intensity of racism, greed, frontier and urban violence, and sectional conflict building toward what was to be the century's most devastating war. But we need not overlook the one in order to condemn the other. Nor need we, with Spiller et al., obscure the cultural limits which the ideals express in order to appreciate their demands for freedom and initiative. Nor need we, finally, separate the spirit of an "older liberalism," as Matthiessen did, from the "rising forces of exploitation" in order to praise our classic writers' commitment to the possibilities of democracy.¹¹ Those possibilities did not depend on nostalgia alone, or on some heroic lonely struggle of the creative imagination against society. Not one of our classic texts supports this view; it cannot be substantiated by the life and thought of any one of our major writers. On the contrary: all of them testify that the historical achievements and the violence are together integral to the cultural dynamics which produced the American Renaissance. Consciously or not, our classic writers are implicated in both; and if we dissociate them, as we should, from the worst excesses of the time, we must recognize nonetheless that they were accomplices of the culture in its complex totality—antagonists of its worst qualities because advocates of its best. We will never properly understand their force of enterprise, speculation, and invention, until we set this firmly within a history of American enterprise, speculation, and invention in the nineteenth century. We will never properly define their modernity, until we appreciate the culture's capacity—*through* violence, disruption, and dissent—to unleash and control the tremendous energies of modernization that transformed antebellum America.

Let me illustrate the connection briefly by two unlikely examples, both of them bearing directly upon the current dissensus in American literary criticism. The first is *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which is now having a renaissance of its own. No doubt, the very fact of this renaissance highlights the repressive force of the American ideology—with regard both to the canon that excluded Stowe's novel from serious literary study, and to the consensus history that derogated the rich and intricate world view embodied in sentimental fiction. But the novel itself stands as a testament to the culture's sustained and sustaining *vitality*. To understand *Uncle Tom's Cabin* intrinsically, in its own terms—to appreciate its aesthetic strategies, and for that matter the enormous appeal of its sentimentalism, then and now—is to recognize the capacity of Stowe's society for absorbing change, for fusing the disparate ideals of evangelical religion, domesticity, and manifest destiny, and for turning social crisis into a movement toward social reform. Lincoln called Stowe the little woman who made the great war. It might be said more plausibly that the forces which converged to make war irrepressible also made possible the triumphant art of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It is no accident, surely, that the two alternatives which

Stowe offers to slavery—and more largely to the exploitation of “the lowly,” North and South—turn out to be a utopian affirmation of America’s actual growth: at one end, the outmoded agrarian community that shelters George Harris on his way to freedom; at the other end, in the novel’s happy resolution, the free-enterprise republic that George projects, his American errand into the wilderness of Liberia, in fulfillment of his (and in part Stowe’s) dream.

My second unlikely example is *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. We owe our new interest in this classic largely to the work under way in black studies, which again reminds us of the limitations of the old consensus. And again I would urge that our sense of those limitations should not blind us to the powerful and positive influence of cultural consensus in the *Narrative* itself. I refer to the *liberating* appeal for Douglass of free-enterprise ideology. On some level, certainly, he manipulated the ideology—the rhetoric of equal opportunity, contract society, upward mobility, free trade, and the sanctity of private property—to justify his flight to freedom. But it seems just as certain that on another, perhaps deeper level he was being manipulated in turn by those cultural keywords *and energized by them*. Freedom for Douglass means self-possessive individualism. It takes the form of a movement from absolute injustice (represented by the slave system) to absolute justice, represented by the tenets of American liberalism. To the extent that Douglass denounces American society, it is for not being true to its own principles, for failing to comply in practice with a social order that in theory is Social Order incarnate: reasonable, moral, and (through scripture) divinely sanctioned. The *Narrative* interprets the life of Frederick Douglass as an exemplum of that faith. And however we interpret the *Narrative*, we must acknowledge the creative force of its faith. More than that, we must acknowledge how flexibly it could embrace diverse cultural traditions (in this case Afro-American forms of expression) in such a way as simultaneously to deflect radical energies and to inspire the work of art.

I do not offer these examples as a foreshadowing of things to come in the new *Cambridge History*. They are meant to specify one of several points of dissensus in American literary criticism. I have no intention of trying to reconcile these disparate approaches here; and indeed I hope that the *problem* of ideology will deter our contributors from imposing easy solutions. I have in mind now not the solutions of the old consensus but those implicit in the recent trend toward pluralism. Or rather, the latest “re-trend” toward pluralism, for pluralism itself is part of a long-established pattern in American scholarship, what we might call a self-perpetuating cycle of diversity and consensus. It was once said, in reaction against those who sought to define America “intellectually,” that America was sheer pragmatism and process; the intellectuals had the American idea, “the people” had “the American experience.” Now it is said, in reaction against those who speak of an American literature or a national

culture, that the country is sheer heterogeneity. The ruling elite has an American ideology; the people have their own patchwork-quilt (rather than melting-pot) American multifariousness: "America" is . . . many forms of ethnicity, many patterns of thought, many ways of life, many cultures, many American literatures.

I would suggest that this is not the opposite of consensus, but the other side of the same ideological coin, part of a rhetoric whose vision of union is grounded in appeals to multiplicity. This is not to equate earlier with recent American studies; there are significant differences, and I trust that our contributors will make use of the best insights of the new pluralism without succumbing to the ideological trap it signals. The insights are those which challenge familiar assumptions. The trap lies in the way that the challenge itself may become the means for avoiding the questions raised by dissensus. Every ideology construes its own way into this trap. The American way is to turn potential conflict into a quarrel about fusion or fragmentation. It is a fixed match, a debate with a foregone conclusion: you must have your fusion and feed on fragmentation too. And the formula for doing so has become virtually a cultural reflex: you just alternate between harmony-in-diversity and diversity-in-harmony. It amounts to a hermeneutics of laissez-faire: all problems are obviated by the continual flow of the one into the many, and the many into the one, as in Adam Smith's theory of the general will, or the Federalist doctrine of balance of power, or the anti-Federalist doctrine of states' rights, or Whitman's self-en masse, or Poe's vision of cosmic alternation in *Eureka*, or the fable of Man Thinking in Emerson's *American Scholar*. The latest form of this orthodoxy posits a diversity of scholars, of every race and creed, all bent on capturing the heterogeneity of America, like that motley *Pequod*'s crew bent on the ubiquitous white whale; or more accurately, like so many Ishmaels explaining the pursuit as though Ahab were largely irrelevant, the representative of a tiny elite, the voice merely of an articulate few, or—as Pip puts it, forgetting the actual hegemony on the *Pequod*—just one of many points of view.

This is part of the background I mentioned earlier, *against* which our literary history will have to define itself. Our option is not pluralism or consensus. It is whether to make use of the categories of culture or to be used by them. I believe in this regard that to recognize the limitations of ideology is to open up interpretation; whereas, conversely, to deny those limitations is to subject interpretation to ideology. This is not to claim that we will altogether avoid the traps embedded in the quest for an American literary tradition, either in its unitary or its pluralistic guises. The advantage in focusing on the problem of ideology is not that this will lead us out of the wilderness of consensus into a Canaan of unmediated truth. Quite the contrary: it is the recognition that that promise is itself a function of ideology (variously mediated by religion, science, and art), and the possibility, therefore, that we may see the ways of the wilderness

more clearly. In this regard I suspect that in the long run our *History* may be no less important for the questions it raises than for the answers it provides. All our contributors, even the traditionalists among them, share a resistance to solutions, a skepticism about the formulaic or the "natural," an instinctive distrust of totalizing answers. That almost programmatic suspiciousness is the negative side of our venture. The other, complementary side lies in the freshness of perspective which the resistance provokes—the richness of the problems at issue, the methodological and practical challenges involved in our inquiries.

I would like to think (in spite of the reservations I have just voiced) that among these benefits is the prospect of an open-ended dialectic between literary and historical analysis. If we can meet that challenge, we may make a virtue of dissensus after all. For one thing, we may be able to deal more fully with the historical dissensus that has informed every stage of America's growth from colony to world power. For another thing, we may convey the dynamics of dissensus inherent in the very notion of an American literature. I speak now not of our so-called literary radicalism, but of the unresolved conflict at the heart of the Romantic-democratic concept of art—our classic writers' dual commitment both to "high" literature (as the expression of transcendent personal genius) and to a literature that represents "the people" at large. Third, we may convey the dissensus embedded in the classic status of our major works. We tend to forget that virtually all of these novels, essays, and poems were controversial from the start—that *Moby-Dick*, *Leaves of Grass*, *Walden*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *The American Scholar* (let alone *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*)—all were composed and received in a spirit of dissensus and all have remained controversial ever since, the subject of continual dispute, rediscovery, and polemical redefinition. Not even canonization and consensus history have given them, not one of them (and we might extend the list to *Huckleberry Finn* and beyond), the sort of impregnable monumental status accorded to classics of other cultures.

It may be that this is an aspect of the modernity of American literature. Or it may simply be that America has yet to produce a work of undeniable international greatness on a level with *The Iliad*, *The Divine Comedy*, *Hamlet*, *Don Quixote*, *Faust*. Whatever the case, the recurrent debate about the classic status of our major works offers certain advantages to literary historians: we can use it in a way that will bring alive the problematic course of American literary history. Parrington submerged aesthetic problems in what he perceived as the main currents of national history. Matthiessen felt he had to disengage himself from problems of history in order to serve as advocate for what he perceived as our classic works of art. The current Babel of literary approaches may lead us to a re-vision of our major texts that will make the American Renaissance integral to a living past, part of a volatile interaction between culture, interpretation,

and imaginative expression which persists into the present and remains a vital legacy to our literature and criticism alike.

More than that, it may lead us to a re-vision of the narrow national implications inherent in the notion of an American literary history. By national I mean something very different from nationalist, of course; indeed, nationalism is one of the ideological categories which I expect will come under severe scrutiny in every section of the new *Cambridge History*. Nonetheless, it remains a limitation of our venture that our contributors are Americans (though in several cases emigrant Americans), that most of them have been trained in American universities, and that all of them are engaged with American students and habituated to American academic discourse. I have no solution to the problem this entails except, again, to insist on confronting the problem. Looking back now at the golden age of consensus, it seems clear that Matthiessen's revisionism was rooted in the ideals of the early and mid-nineteenth century. Consciously or not, *American Renaissance*, and the procession of critical syntheses that prepared the way for it and then followed in its wake (from, say, Lewis Mumford's *Golden Day* through the *Spiller History*), all reflect the euphoria of the Young America movement and specifically the vision of a uniquely American literature promulgated by Emerson and Whitman. In some basic sense, that is, it was our classic writers who set the terms for what was to become the framework for interpreting our literary past: the question of the "Americanness" of American literature.

To see this sort of parochialism as problematic is not at all to belittle our critical legacy. The effort to define the "Americanness" of American literature generated a vast amount of scholarship, some of it, like Matthiessen's, of enduring value. Within that framework, literary critics could join with scholars of very different disciplines (history, political science, linguistics, folklore, religion, art, sociology) in ways that helped organize a remarkable variety of materials. The "Americanness" of American literature was a paradigmatic hypothesis that provided techniques for teaching, themes for anthologies and casebooks that supported those techniques, and subjects for theses and monographs that accredited the teachers and anthologists. It raised what must once have seemed a plethora of questions precisely by directing the questioners to a common resolution, centered on an ideological fiction, "Americanness," and grounded in the assumption that that fiction encompassed matters of form and content, text and context. In sum, it opened up new vistas for investigation while providing the terms of closure that made sense of the investigations. And in doing so, the focus on "Americanness" shaped a community of teachers and students, scholars and critics, which rapidly reached beyond national boundaries to include academic communities throughout the world.

That development found one of its first and finest expressions in the Salzburg Seminar. The very format of the Seminar, from 1947 to the present, bespeaks the method—a group of American experts bringing

the latest news about "Americanness" to their European colleagues. And the effectiveness of that method (an intellectual counterpart of sorts to the Marshall Plan) is evident in the growth of European American studies and in the extraordinary esteem in which the Salzburg Seminar is held internationally. It may well be that this was a necessary first stage of development; but the old format no longer suits the issues before us. One exciting prospect of dissensus is that it seems to mark the end of American parochialism. The time has come to establish a Salzburg Seminar in reverse. We need a forum where native Americanists (if I may call them so), scholars trained in the rhetoric and rituals of "Americanness," can learn from their colleagues abroad to re-see American literature in an international perspective. It may well be that this will alter our very concept of "Americanness" by recontextualizing it—for example, by accentuating Emerson's links to Descartes on the one hand and to Nietzsche on the other, or by replacing the tautologies of exceptionalism with the transnational categories of gender, class, and race, or simply by extending the problematics of "art and expression" to accommodate the classics produced by the marginal or excluded groups of the age. It may even be that this comparatist perspective will eventuate in a shift in the literary center of gravity, from the nationalist American Renaissance to the transatlantic enterprise of a later era: James, Norris, Du Bois, Wharton, Adams, Eliot, Pound, Stevens, Stein, and the neglected emigrant "ethnic" writing of the early twentieth century.

In any case, the problem of ideology points us toward a multinational community of Americanists who can profit from dissensus by breaking the confines of a particular cultural symbology. We do not need still another variation, however ingenious, on the theme of America. We would benefit enormously from a fresh perspective, however raw or tentative, on the *limits* of nativist modes of analysis. What we need is an active dialogue between Americanists, trained in the United States but searching for different angles of vision, and "foreign" scholars, trained in "un-American" forms of discourse, who can bring to bear upon the American literary tradition viewpoints from outside the culture. That is not too large a demand to make. There are historical precedents from Tocqueville through Lawrence. There are contemporary stimuli, through the influence of European literary theory. There are examples in the work of American scholars now debating the sorts of issues I tried to sketch in this talk. And there is a group of young Americanists abroad who have as much to contribute to the current revaluation of the literature as their best American counterparts.¹²

On these and similar grounds, we can expect dissensus to yield, in due time, a rich harvest. That's essentially what I had in mind when I spoke earlier of finding a solution in the *problem* of ideology. In its usual meaning ideology precludes dialogue. It implies a programmatic parochialism, a closed and exclusive system developed in opposition to al-

ternative explanations and militantly committed to partiality, "uniqueness," and sectarian (or national) exceptionalism. My hope is that we can use ideological analysis to precisely the opposite effect: to turn the current barbarism of critical debate into a dialogue about common questions. In our ability to keep the dialogue open, while specifying and exploring the questions we share, lies the prospect of our achieving an integrated narrative of American literary history. In our ability to open up the dialogue to questions that reach beyond the boundaries of national self-definition, while recognizing and accounting for the pressures of American ideology, lies the prospect of attaining, in the next generation if not in ours, a new coherence in the study of American literature and culture.

1. See *The Literary History of the United States*, ed. Robert Spiller et al., 4th ed., rev. (New York, 1974), pp. ix–xx. Here and elsewhere I use Spiller's name as synonymous with the *History* as a whole. The "Address to the Reader" is by "Henry Seidel Canby; the Editors and Associates."

2. F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (Oxford, 1941), p. xv.

3. This brief report is an altered version of a talk I gave at the MLA Convention, New York, December 1984, to be published in *American Literature*.

4. Parts of the section on ideology that follows were taken (and altered for this occasion) from my afterword to *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (Cambridge, 1986).

5. For the following paragraph I am indebted to Jehlen's introduction to *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, which discusses in detail the various approaches I outline below.

6. See Henry Nash Smith, "Myth and Ideology in *Virgin Land*," in *Ideology and Classic American Literature*.

7. A full discussion of the trends I note below appears in Jehlen's introduction to *Ideology and Classic American Literature*.

8. See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York, 1958); Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (New York, 1946); and Clifford Geertz, "Ideology as a Cultural System," *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), pp. 193–233.

9. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, in *Redburn, White-Jacket, Moby-Dick*, ed. G. Thomas Tanselle (New York, 1983), p. 798; Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Life of Franklin Pierce, Works*, ed. George P. Lathrop, 24 vols. (Boston, 1887), 17:165–66; Melville, "Misgivings" (1860), *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, ed. Sidney Kaplan (Amherst, Mass., 1972), p. 13.

10. A powerful example is Philip Fisher's unpublished essay "What Was America," to which the following two paragraphs are deeply indebted.

11. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, p. ix.

12. I have in mind all the members of the 1985 Salzburg Seminar, whom I would like to take this opportunity to thank for two extraordinary weeks of intellectual excitement and personal warmth and generosity.